

A Comparison between *Roman Tales: A Reader's Guide to the Art of Microhistory*, by T.V. Cohen, and *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice*, by S.G. Magnússon and I.M. Szijártó

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‘...rightly understood, critical comparison is not content to collate evidences from the same plane of time’
(M. Bloch (1992 [1954]), *The Historian's Craft*, p.101).

Abstract

This comparative study shows differences and similarities between two different books in the field of microhistory, in the same way as differences and similarities between the two authors in one of the two books are foregrounded.

There is a view in the language of comparative history that resemblances should not be too strong, because a comparison would then no longer support the case. The reverse is also true.

The comparative historical method is a useful tool in microhistory studies because the uncertainties that exist in our minds stem from the inherent different human perspectives we have and defend, rather than from the study object/s or a lack of sufficient sources.

While Roman Tales. A Reader's Guide to the Art of Microhistory (2019) focuses on sixteenth-century Romans who, at the lower levels of their society, simply wanted to improve their lots, What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice (2013) is on the other hand, a dialogue between the authors of this book about the theories and practices of microhistory.

In a sense, T.V. Cohen's use of eight self-containing micro-tales is analogous to I.M. Szijártó's focus on five countries as self-containing units of study for his purposes.

This essay also alluded to practical, future research opportunities for South African scholars.

KEY WORDS: book titles; advancement of microhistory; two book parts; conclusions; detail and space; experimentation; canon; and authorial space.

Introduction

This study¹ *aims* to illustrate the degree which two different microhistory books can be productively compared. These few pages will also show that there is substantial support in the literature that the comparative historical analysis is a productive tool for the microhistorical approach when applied to well-defined research objects. At a general level, similarities can best be determined against their differences, and differences can best be determined against their similarities. This binary is a universal methodological burden from which historians cannot escape.

More than a decade ago, Muriel Blaive argued that comparative microhistory is an ideal method for the microhistorical method in order to ‘analyse subordinate and dominant discussions to decode power relations....’² For Jürgen Kocka, the comparative method is useful to frame questions for and analyses of single cases,³ and Chris Lorenz agrees with Kocka.⁴ Lastly, Jacques Barzun emphasised the ‘similarity *and* difference’⁵ in the comparative historical method.

What is Microhistory? ‘should be read as a dialogue or a debate on microhistory’⁶ not only between its two co-authors, but also within the larger the microhistorical community.

¹ An earlier version of this essay (since much reworked) was prepared for an international online course: ‘Microhistory: Classical and current works’, presented by prof. I.M. Szi­jártó from 13 Jan. 2022 to 7 Apr. 2022. I wish to thank prof. Szi­jártó for accommodating me as a guest student in this course and for his, and all the fellow students’ valuable critical feedback.

² M. Blaive, ‘Hidden Transcripts’ and Microhistory as a Comparative Tool: Two Case Studies in Communist Czechoslovakia’, in *East Central Europe*, 40, (1–2), (2013), 74–96, www.researchgate.net/publication/291053839_Hidden_Transcripts_and_Microhistory_as_a_Comparative_Tool_Two_Case_Studies_in_Communist_Czechoslovakia, accessed 17 March 2022.

³ J. Kocka, ‘Comparison and Beyond,’ in *History and Theory*, 42, (2004), 39, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1468-2303.00228>, accessed 12 March 2022.

⁴ C. Lorenz, ‘Comparative Historiography: Problems and Perspectives’, in *History and Theory*, 38, (1999), 25, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227649401_Comparative_Historiography_Problems_and_Perspectives, accessed 5 March 2022.

⁵ J. Barzun, *Clio and the Doctors. Psycho-history Quanto-history and History*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 38.

⁶ S.G. Magnússon, and I.M. Szi­jártó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 10.

Romans Tales, though, ‘has made early modern Rome and Italy feel at once more familiar and more strange’.⁷

Both books cover *vast historical periods* although from different perspectives and for different purposes: *Roman Tales* is aimed at students, teachers and the general public and covers at least five decades of the sixteenth century. While the examples in *What is Microhistory?* are aimed more at students and teachers, they are not confined to the sixteenth century by the authors. In addition, *all three authors apply theory*. For instance, Thomas V. Cohen states that *Roman Tales*’ stories ‘reflect an implicit theory of social action’.⁸ István M. Szijártó argued that ‘the belated impact of modernist theories [...] arrived at the theory of history at the same time, amplifying each other’s effect’.⁹ Sigurður G. Magnússon prefers to use the term ‘ideology’ and considers microhistory as ‘a systematic ideology.’¹⁰

The *method* for the remaining pages identify (some) themes that straddle both books and comment on their comparative similarities and differences. Arguments to substantiate claims, do not only draw from relevant microhistorical *literature* as the source list reflects.

The question about comparability is important, as is Georg G. Iggers’s recommendation that ‘globalization [...] has not resulted in homogenization of cultural, social, political or even economic planes [...] resulting in historians and social scientists engaging in comparative studies’, begins to speak of entangled histories.¹¹ Comparability and globalisation have far-reaching influences.

⁷ T.V. Cohen, *Roman Tales: A Reader’s Guide to the Art of Microhistory*. (New York: Routledge, 2019), ‘Afterword’, [160].

⁸ *Ibid.*, [1].

⁹ Magnússon and Szijártó, *What is Microhistory?* 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹¹ G.G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century. From Scientific Objectivity to the Post Modern Challenge* (with a new epilogue by the author). (Middletown: Connecticut Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 158.

Nine themes compared

The first theme relates to the respective titles of the two books. When comparing the two *titles*, an *implied similarity* appears: the *art* of microhistory implies its own theory and practice, while theory and practice can figuratively speaking point at an *artistic* element. Despite this binary, the difference in the titles, however, is that *Roman Tales* portrays a confined geographic focus (Rome), that was not required in *What is Microhistory?* because the author chose geopolitical relevance in the countries that he focused on.

The second theme relates to the advancement of microhistory. Although both books *promote microhistory*, there are significant *differences of approach and methodology* between Magnússon and Szijártó. Both authors agree publicly that there is no use in hiding their scholarly differences.¹² In other words, when comparing *Roman Tales* to *What is Microhistory?* one needs to keep in mind both horizontal (width) and vertical (depth) differences of dialogue. The first is of an *inter-* (between the authors of two different books) and the second of an *intra-nature* (between authors of the same book). This ‘Magnússon-Szijártó microhistorical debate’ is both productive and educational also outside *What is Microhistory?* As a result, *What is Microhistory?* is *more than a platform* for scholarly differences but also an invitation to debate.

The structure of the two books is the third theme. Both books are presented in *two parts*: In *What is Microhistory?* the first sections of Part I, focus on theoretical aspects of microhistory. The second section of Part I is a historiographical overview of the main geographical *loci* of microhistory, be it Italian *microstoria*, French and German perspectives to microhistory, Anglo-Saxon microhistory, or American, Russian or Hungarian versions. Part II deals in detail with an Icelandic focus. Interestingly, the first part of *Roman Tales*, also focuses on theoretical aspects of microhistory although it employs a different rubric and language. Cohen termed them ‘first thoughts’. The last few pages attends to pedagogy

¹² Magnússon and Szijártó, *What is Microhistory?* 8–11, 157–59.

including examples of teaching methodologies and techniques of practical nature in the classroom.

The fourth theme makes observations about the conclusions of the authors. The *conclusions* in both books were *treated differently*: In *Roman Tales*, Cohen uses what he termed ‘afterthoughts’ that are condense summative conclusions, sometimes with examples and suggestions for alternative interpretations. On the other hand, Magnússon and Szi-jártó’s concluding remarks are often already woven into the narrative as they unfold in their respective sections.

The fifth theme deals with small detail and space. The small detail of authors (one author for one book but two authors in the other), is important because in *What is Microhistory?* ‘authorial space’ had to be managed. This means that Magnússon and Szi-jártó had to ‘consider’ each other and split the number of pages approximately evenly between them. Szi-jártó wrote the ‘Introduction’¹³ and Magnússon wrote the ‘Postscript’ to *What is Microhistory?*¹⁴ Cohen had all the authorial space to himself. Such relative limitations impact on *comprehensiveness of presentation* – Cohen did not have to consider a co-author, even if authorial space is limited.

The next theme comments on experimentation. Both books reflect an *experimental* characteristic. Cohen wrote that experimental pedagogy in his classes follows no rigid model. Devices of all sorts can usually flourish in class when teachers follow their inclinations and when they adapt pedagogy in the classroom situation.¹⁵ In his part of *What is Microhistory?* Szi-jártó referred twice to microhistory’s productive relation to the experimental and specifically to the microhistorical approach that is compatible with the experiment and the historical narrative.¹⁶ In an important paragraph to emphasise this, Magnússon states his

¹³ Ibid., 1–11.

¹⁴ Ibid, 147–59.

¹⁵ Cohen, *Roman Tales*, [14].

¹⁶ Magnússon and Szi-jártó, *What is Microhistory?* 8, 60, 71.

position as follows: ‘...microhistory [...] constitutes an important experiment in approaching the past in a different way from what has been done before.’¹⁷

The seventh theme emphasises canon. Not surprisingly, for Cohen microhistory is canon-free and it ‘settles reluctantly into fixed habits, if ever.’¹⁸ But for Szigjártó, microhistory does not seek to establish new orthodoxies.¹⁹ However, when Magnússon explained how ‘an increasing penchant among conventional historians [...] rebel against the current orthodoxy of traditional writing [...] and that this methodology is almost compulsory for the microhistorian...’,²⁰ then it appears that he must be advocating, by implication, in favour of new orthodoxies. Similarly, Magnússon’s concept of the ‘singularization’ of microhistory, stands for a new orthodoxy in and for microhistory.²¹

The eighth theme attends to semantics. Both books use the opportunity to clarify the *semantics surrounding the concept of method*. Magnússon uses the term *ideology* (meaning: research, narrative and method) instead of *methodology* – ‘methodology is the technical aspects of how the subject is handled’.²² To illustrate this point, perspective and interpretation are no less technical or more important than the way how annotations are done. The implication is that method serves an historical approach when research attends to technical matters. Cohen uses the term *practice* – the practice or habit of extracting evidence from all nooks and crannies.²³

¹⁷ Ibid., 137.

¹⁸ Cohen, *Roman Tales*, [1].

¹⁹ Magnússon and Szigjártó, *What is Microhistory?* 11.

²⁰ S.G. Magnússon, *Emotional Experience and Microhistory. A Life Story of a Destitute Pauper Poet in the 19th Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 119.

²¹ S.G. Magnússon, ‘The Singularization of History: Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge.’ (An un-refereed author version of an article) published in [*Journal of Social History*, (Spring) 36, 3 (2003), 701–35], 1–32, https://www.academia.edu/5196062/The_Singularization_of_History_Social_History_and_Microhistory_within_the_Postmodern_State_of_Knowledge_Journal_of_Social_History_2003, accessed 10 June 2020.

²² Magnússon and Szigjártó, *What is Microhistory?* 159.

²³ Cohen, *Roman Tales*, [2].

The final theme that warrants comments is about authorial outcomes. On the balance of generalising, the three *authors* essentially *ask the same question* about the outcome of their books. Cohen's question is: 'Where has this book brought us?'²⁴ His answer is that the book has succeeded in its objectives if it led us into the thoughts, reflexes, and imagined habits of the residents of a time and a place that is different to our own.²⁵ Szijártó answer about their book: it is a book 'with two distinct interpretations of microhistory'.²⁶ In the case of Magnússon, I had to change the hypothesis slightly to change his following statement, into a question. Magnússon's statement: 'All the work in this book had the aim of finding and defining new channels for microhistory and seeking ways for it to be applied in research on new subjects'.²⁷ The question: Did this book achieve the aim of finding and defining new channels for microhistory in seeking ways for it to be applied in research on new subjects? The answer is more complex than resorting to a simplistic answer. I propose the following to serve as an answer by Magnússon: 'Historians will, I suppose, just have to accept that the past will never be within their grasp. Recognizing this is, to my mind, history's most powerful defence and it is on this basis that microhistorians of the future will have to operate'.²⁸ In a sense, historians are bound by the uncertainty gap between a 'horizon of expectations and space of experience'.²⁹

²⁴ Ibid., [159].

²⁵ Ibid., [160].

²⁶ Magnússon and Szijártó, *What is Microhistory?* 10.

²⁷ Ibid., 155.

²⁸ Ibid., 158.

²⁹ L. Deile, 'Conclusion. Historical Understanding Today: Incidental Remarks', in Z.B. Simon and L. Deile, eds., *Historical Understanding. Past, Present and Future*. (London, New York, Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 293–4, https://www.academia.edu/78668368/Historical_Understanding_Past_Present_and_Future, accessed 20 May 2022.

Conclusion

Seemingly different microhistory publications can be fruitfully compared for their individual and collective contributions to the microhistorical method and debates as productive approaches to its well-defined study objects. Conversely, productive microhistorical approaches can also lead to different research outcomes. From both perspectives, the comparative historical method turned out to be valuable analytical tool in both books.

From this experimental comparative approach and the results it foregrounded, one might argue from the above results, that the rise and development of the application of the microhistorical method in South Africa, can in future research productively compared to that of Australia. Stated differently, this essay also has practical value for future research. If one does not attempt and accept experimental work we might be confined to the terms of the ‘reality of disappearance’³⁰

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